



Suffrage stories

Born in Caithness, Scotland, Elizabeth arrived in Auckland in 1853 with her parents and sister. Little is known about her early life prior to her marriage to influential mariner Michael Yates. The couple had no children and lived in the family home with Elizabeth's widowed mother.

Michael was Mayor of the Onehunga Borough Council from 1888-1892. Elizabeth assisted him with this civic work. She was a strong supporter of women's suffrage and was the first woman to record her vote in the electorate under the new Electoral Act of 1893.

In 1893, Elizabeth herself won the office of mayor of Onehunga, becoming the first woman mayor in the British Empire. This radical departure from convention caused much comment throughout New Zealand and the empire. Her election prompted four councillors and the town clerk to resign.

Meetings often were fraught with much publicised conflict. Elizabeth's disregard for formal procedures and at times dictatorial manner alienated some. But by the time she was voted out of office a year later, she had liquidated the borough debt, reorganised the fire brigade and upgraded roads, footpaths and sanitation. Even her critics conceded that she had done a good job.

Elizabeth Yates

1845-1918



■ Elizabeth Yates, 1893. Credit: C17, 351, Auckland War Memorial Museum Tamaka Paenga Hira.



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